

BULGARIA & MACEDONIA JUNE 2008.

Trip Highlights

Bulgaria

Sofia

Sofia is one of the oldest capital cities in Europe, with the history of Sofia dating as far back as the 8th century BC, when Thracians established a settlement here. The backdrop for Sofia is stunning; sitting in Sofia Valley at the foot of the Vitosha Mountain. The town centre is dominated by drab neo-classical Stalinist architecture, which belies the vibrancy of the modern-day Sofia. However, take a short walk to the old commercial area and you will find the real heart of Sofia, with tree-lined boulevards, elaborate 19th-century buildings and neo-Byzantine Orthodox churches.

Rila Monastery

Rila Monastery, the largest and most famous monastery in Bulgaria. The monks of this monastery were instrumental in preserving traditional Bulgarian culture when this area was under Ottoman rule. Now, you can marvel at its sheer size, with 300 rooms and a magnificent, three-domed church.

Veliko Tarnovo

Veliko Tarnovo, is one of the most ancient Bulgarian towns and the sight of the town's houses, stacked seemingly precariously one above the other on the hillsides is striking. Within the town itself there are a wealth of palaces, towers, ancient columns, monasteries and museums to explore. This abundance of architecture and culture sees thousands of tourists from Bulgaria, and abroad, visiting the town every year; placing it as one of the top ten most visited tourist destinations in Eastern Europe.

Koprivshtitsa

Popular with Bulgarian travellers seeking peace and quiet, historical Koprivshtitsa offers a glimpse of 19th-Century life with its 400 lovely revival-era buildings where you can sleep, eat and get drunk! A babbling creek runs through the centre of town, with green hills and trails surrounding it. Six traditional homes are now house museums and are well worth a visit.

Bansko

Far more than the ski town it's known to be, friendly Bansko – at the base of Mt Vihren (2914m) and the Pirin mountains – probably has the country's best mekhanas (festive tavern restaurants), with rollicking folk bands playing many nights all year. Take the minibus to Vihren hut for access to some fantastic mountain trails.

MACEDONIA

Skopje

Skopje is the capital and the largest city of the Republic of Macedonia. Located on a major north south Balkan route between Belgrade and Athens, Skopje has had a tumultuous past; with the Roman's, Serbs and Ottoman Turks all occupying the city before it became part of Yugoslavia in 1918. A devastating earthquake then struck Skopje in 1963 when more than 1000 people died and a huge proportion of the city's buildings were lost, as a result much of Skopje's architecture dates from the 1960s and 1970s. Fortunately Skopje's entire heritage was not lost, as much of the northern half of the city escaped untouched, leaving many architectural reminders of the city's past as an important trading town of the Ottoman Empire. As a monument to the loss the earthquake caused the clock at the Old Train Station, is forever stopped at the moment the earthquake struck.

Lake Ohrid

This beautiful lake was made a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1979, and is probably the oldest lake in Europe and one of the oldest lakes in the world, as it was formed tectonically between 4 and 10 million years ago. Water is supplied by the unusual means of spring water from numerous surface and underwater springs and the lake is home to a unique aquatic ecosystem with more than 200 endemic species that are of worldwide importance. Known for its beauty, excellent fishing and its several beaches it's located on the border between Macedonia and the Republic of Albania. The Macedonian section of the lake is beautiful, set amid mountains with stunning views of the water from the beach and hills.

The town of Ohrid itself is one of Macedonia's most popular tourist destinations; with plenty of cultural monuments to keep you occupied, especially in the old town where amongst other highlights you can see part of a Roman amphitheater